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ABSTRACT

A number of adult basic education (ABE) students who had spent time in both traditional, group-paced ABE or high school equivalency programs and experimental individualized learning conditions were interviewed concerning their preferences with respect to these two instructional approaches. The following three conclusions emerged from the interviews: ABE students who return to school after bad experiences as children or adolescents are keenly aware of their previous educational failures; even for those who can handle the academic challenges of ABE, problems often arise in coping with the dual roles of adult and student; and adult students often have extenuating health or family pressures that necessitate special accommodation efforts on the part of instructors. Data from these interviews and from other studies suggest that it is not personal inadequacies but rather school-related problems that are responsible for most withdrawals from ABE programs; these data underscore the need for treating adult students as individuals and providing adult learners with learning choices so that they may (1) remove themselves from frustrating or boring situations, (2) adjust when other responsibilities demand priority, and (3) exercise the same self-direction in learning that they both enjoy and are expected to use in other areas of their lives. (MN)

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STUDENTS' NEEDS AS THE IMPETUS FOR INDIVIDUALIZATION IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

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Students' Needs as the Impetus for Individualization in Adult Basic Education

No Panaceas

A recent review of the literature on computer use in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and GED classrooms (Rachel, 1984) concludes that computers are present "to a still very limited extent," but that they generally appear to be "as effective as, [or] more effective than, traditional" learning media (p. 94). Besides these more or less optimistic findings, however, the article points out several areas where fundamental problems have occurred with implementation of computer-based learning (CBL) in adult education. For example, the "hardware syndrome" causes some would-be implementers to assume that "the acquisition and installation of hardware [will] in itself transform the ... program" without accompanying "staff training, curriculum development, and software acquisition...." (*ibid.*, p. 92). There is also a tendency to regard CBL as "supplementary," producing a "mixture of instructional methods [which is] apparently confusing" to students and staff (*ibid.*). Rachel even expresses the fear that present computer use, because it

lacks a pattern of consistent success with adults, "may frighten away as many or even more prospective students as it attracts" (*ibid.*).

These are not just isolated examples from adult education of disillusionment with computer-based learning. Others have warned that as a general educational tool CBL may simply exacerbate existing educational inequities (The Computing Teacher, 1983; Sturdivant, 1983), and that some claims and implementations are simply not "wise" (Rockman, *et. al.*, 1983) or even educationally sound (Roblyer, 1983). One observer pessimistically concludes that prospects for the future are even more bleak, since as costs for computing hardware decline review and quality assurance processes will become increasingly lower administrative priorities (Van Dusseldorp, 1983).

Just as these problems are not unique to the computer as a delivery medium, neither are the suggested solutions. In her insightful analysis, Roblyer (1983) agrees that poor quality courseware has been a major impediment to successful CBL applications, and then goes on to argue that this failure is really a symptom of the deeper problems of *faulty planning, implementation and development strategies.* As a solution, she suggests an approach to curriculum design and development which focuses foremost on *individual learning needs* (1982, p.28).

The call for carefully designed individual treatments of students' learning problems is not new. Berte (1975)

maintains that the case for individualized learning "has been accumulating for the past 150 years" (p. vii). Others have shown that students more quickly develop personal autonomy and feelings of control in individualized learning situations (Boud, 1981; Knowles, 1981; Roueche and Mink, 1975); that individualized learning results in better learning (Kemp, 1977); that attrition rates decline when individual needs are met (Duby, 1978; Boylan, 1976), and that both students (Murphy, 1983; Warren, 1973; Zemke and Zemke, 1981) and instructors (Mezirow and Irish, 1974; Weleschuk, 1977) appreciate the advantages of individualization, after they actually experience it.

Why is it, then, that a medium like computer-based learning, which is uniquely capable of supporting individualized learning (Brudner, 1982), has thus far received such tepid acceptance? Part of the problem may be that bloodless theory, and the good intentions it produces, can be overwhelmed by the problems of daily survival in underfinanced and under-manned programs. This may be why more teachers pay lip service to individualization than actually strive to provide it, or than actually succeed (Offir, 1983). It may also be why CBL, as the newest and most glamorous educational delivery medium, has had such mixed reviews. What is lacking is a keen sense of urgency on the part of teachers and administrators, based on a clear understanding of the importance of the goal of individual treatment for adult learners' needs. Perhaps if we knew the

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extent to which students' lives are being affected by our actions, or our inertia, in support of individualized learning, we would find the time, funds, energy and design leadership needed to achieve it.

The Identification of Curriculum Needs From Student Opinions

Recent experiences with curriculum development in traditional group-paced, teacher-centered ABE and GED programs have left me with two deep convictions. First, the emphasis on *student needs* in the selection of *all* delivery media is essential. This focus avoids uses of the computer (or any other medium) simply to showcase the *medium* (Roblyer, 1982). Second, as I hope to show in this paper, the real-life needs of adult learners, especially when described in their own words, can themselves be powerful guides for the general direction of curriculum change in ABE and GED, with some inferences on our part. My thesis here is that *when allowed to speak on their own behalf adult students, even those in literacy-level programs, can be very persuasive about the kind and direction of changes needed in their programs.*

These convictions arise from my work over the past several years with ABE and GED programs in a large adult education institution, attempting to implement a systems methodology for needs assessment and curriculum design, and using CML to help facilitate individualization. The chief

goal of a variety of curriculum revision projects in this environment has been to increase the amount of attention paid to individual students' needs by our ABE curriculum. As a regular part of the evaluation of these projects I have interviewed a number of ABE/GED students who have spent time both in a traditional group-paced ABE/GED program, and in experimental individualized learning conditions. These interviews have provided information about the reality of adult learning from the students' viewpoint. The interviews show dramatically both *what* ABE/GED curriculum should be, and *why*. Readers involved with education at any level will, I believe, find these students' stories pertinent and compelling testimony to the importance of curriculum respectful of individual circumstances.

The student interviews were initially part of the evaluation of newly-individualized ABE courses, or course components. (Part of our implementation strategy for individualizing curriculum has been to allow instructors to identify parts of courses with which to gain initial experience with individualization and computer-management [Fahy, 1984].) However, the interviews were extended to any observations the students voluntarily made as they compared, implicitly and explicitly, the differences between the individualized, computer-managed way of learning they were presently experiencing and the traditional ways they were accustomed to. I conducted the interviews singly with students using a tape recorder. A typed transcript of each

taped interview was returned for corrections by the student, and for later analysis. On the basis of dozens of interviews with students at all levels of the ABE/GED program, three major conclusions with implications for curriculum and learning conditions (including computer use) were reached. What follows is a presentation of these conclusions and examples of the evidence from the interviews leading to them.

Three Major Findings

Fear of "The Same Old Story."

Adult Basic Education students who return to school after bad experiences as children or adolescents are keenly aware of the fact of their previous educational failures. In the interviews students repeatedly showed that one of their major fears as adult learners was that school would be the same as when they were younger: confusion, failure, embarrassment, dropping-out. R.S., in her mid-twenties, talks about her earlier experiences:

Q: How has it been, coming back to school?

R.S. Different! Uh, from high school to this school is a big difference. There's a lot of things here that I never knew.

Q: In the areas of math and English?

R.S. Yeah. Like in math I never took decimals and fractions. When I took high school math we did it with adding machines and calculators. We didn't use our brains at all, just pushed buttons. That was it.

Q: Are you surviving?

R.S. Oh, yeah. I'm learning it. This term it's

> not frustrating at all. Last term the math was very frustrating, extremely frustrating. I'd get really mad and just heave the book into the corner and say, "Piss on it! [Laughs] I don't care if I learn this garbage! I don't understand it and the teacher doesn't have time to explain it to me!" You know because, like, the problem I found last term was the teacher would write it on the board one way, and then I would do it that way on the test and she would say, "No, that's not the way it's supposed to be done." So I was getting all bungled up inside.

Although she protests that she is now learning, R.S. initially found disconcerting parallels as an adult student with her previous unsuccessful school experiences. She was confused and felt misled and neglected by her instructors. The result was the same feeling of incompetence she had experienced in her previous schooling -- and the same adolescent rebellion. It was not that her teachers were insensitive to her situation, just ineffective in addressing it. She describes the math instructor's attempts to encourage her:

> R.S. ... the thing in math I find right now that's really got me messed up is the metric thing. And like [the instructor] said to me when I told him I couldn't do it, because it's metric, he told me, "Well, don't even think of it as metric. Think of it as, like when it says eight point five millimetres, think of it as eight point five inches. [Pause] But I still couldn't get it . . . .

With the growing body of information about the variability and importance of individual learning styles in affecting achievement (Wilson, 1980; Gregorc, 1982; Holland, 1982; Knaak, 1983; Stewart, 1984), it is unfortunate that R.S. received no better treatment than unhelpful advice. Knaak (1983) points out that teachers may no longer assume popular support for the belief that students who haven't

learned simply haven't paid attention. If we begin with the assumption that everyone can and will learn *under the right conditions*, and still observe failure, we must look for *errors in the instruction*, not faults in the learner (Bloom, 1976).

The essential problem for R.S. is that her instructors accept her failure to learn, and she doesn't. She admits that she doesn't learn well in the classroom environment, at the "average" pace set by her instructors, but she refuses to give up because of this. She therefore suffers twice, first because she isn't learning, and then because she keeps insisting that she *could*. She won't quit, so she gets useless and frustrating advice, instead of a different approach that might meet her needs better and allow her to learn on *her* terms. Without attention to her individual learning needs she is unlikely to pass the course, but because of her personality she will likely persist in trying, and suffer growing bitterness at the failures she believes, with some reason, are not completely her fault.

Problems Granting -- and Exercising -- Autonomy

For those who find they can handle the academic challenges, there are sometimes problems adapting to the dual roles of adult and student. There is a paradox: in enrolling in an Adult *Basic Education* program students admit they lack some skills and knowledge considered elementary in our culture. But they are still *adults*, many with the

responsibilities and status of years of successful adult functioning in the community. They do not readily accept that lack of basic academic credentials should force them to lose adult dignity or their basic rights of self-direction.

T.M. speaks angrily of a recent experience in her ABE course:

> T.M. [Something] that happened to me last semester is an instructor said to me, "No matter what, you'll be going into [High School English]...." Well, she told me I was the top one in the class, and all that, too, eh. So of course you don't tend to, uh, study as much, when, uh, the instructor tells that to you. And that's what happened to me. And apparently I got low grades on my final mark. So I feel she shouldn't have said [anything] at all until the end.
>
> Q: It didn't help you....
>
> T.M. Yeah. Well, I don't think that's really fair, the instructor saying, you know, "You're the top student. You're going to go on to [High School] for sure." Then turn around and say, "You're going into an ongoing [repeating] class."

In his discussion of the meaning of autonomy, Boud (1981:22) writes, "A person is autonomous to the degree ... that what he thinks and does ... are determined by himself." He goes on to advise that an environment conducive to student growth in autonomy must have "standardized and explicit behavior norms" in which "consequences of behavior are known" (*ibid.*, p. 31).

T.M.'s behavior in her English class was not based on her own perceptions or judgments but on the teacher's. She feels betrayed by her instructor when she's held back, but

she never did know what she was doing right, or wrong, for the instructor in that class. She objects to what she sees as the instructor breaking her *word*, not to changes in the rules or standards which, since she never knew them in the first place, could not have been guides to her behavior. She was dependent on mysteriously-earned goodwill, and was disappointed by equally mysterious failure. The environment did not provide her with "standardized and explicit behavior norms," nor did it routinely require her to determine her own actions. At best, she learned little from it; at worst, she learned that the teacher, as the all-powerful authority, makes all the rules.

Effective use of autonomy has to be learned, and T.M. obviously has not learned, and is not learning, its use. Knowles (1981) addresses the argument sometimes advanced that students like T.M. are not capable of exercising self-direction, and therefore require a highly teacher-directed environment. His analysis simultaneously suggests how the origin and the treatment of the problem are interrelated:

> ... we are faced with the reality that most people ... have learned only the skills of learning by being taught. They do not know how to diagnose their own needs for learning, for formulating their own learning objectives, identifying a variety of learning resources and planning strategies for taking the initiative in using those resources, assessing their own learning, and having their assessments validated (p. 8).

It is skills such as self-diagnosis, planning, resource

identification and use, and self-assessment that T.M. needs if she is to avoid future humiliations like the one she suffered in the ABE program. Some would maintain that she needs to acquire these skills more than she needs academics. Potts (1981:111) calls the goal of fostering autonomous behavior in students like T.M. "the harder task," harder than simply teaching an academic curriculum.

Knowles observes that the change in instructor roles which this task involves is actually frightening to most teachers, because (among other reasons) "they do not know how to do it" (1981:8). But what is really involved for the teacher in permitting and fostering student in the classroom? What assumptions have to be challenged, and practices changed? How do you *do* this kind of teaching?

At the risk of answering these complex questions oversimply and only in the negative, some teacher attitudes which will make the goal of greater student autonomy more difficult to achieve were evident in various pilot projects in individualization I observed. On one occasion, in the course of an evaluation, several instructors voiced their opinions on the idea that students need to learn and practice autonomy, in the form of self-direction and independence in their learning. One instructor put his teacher-centered outlook succinctly: "... the success of my students is dependent on what I do." Another instructor contrasted student autonomy with what she viewed as the greater need for "regular student-teacher contact," which she described as

follows:

> ... student-teacher contact is very important. They're [her students] free to go to the library [one hour each day], they're free to do many things. But often you'll hear students say, "I'm afraid I'll miss something." And it's not something I'll be teaching, but it's something they'll hear me saying to somebody else.... I may go to the board or I may do something else. It's that teacher-student contact. They don't want to leave that room.

Both of these instructors are the major initiators of activity and the centers of classroom attention when they teach. In particular, the second teacher not only sets the pace and the agenda, but changes both according to what emerges from day to day, and even from moment to moment, in her classroom. She is proud of this practice, and recommends it as a way to "personalize" the learning environment. On the other hand, this results in a large amount of what Carroll (1963) criticized as "incidental learning," in opposition to which he recommended carefully planned and sequenced "learning tasks." Learning tasks are not always teacher-initiated, nor do they (when they are well-designed) depend upon subjective or spontaneously enacted evaluation criteria. A student like T.M. might be better able to judge her own progress and deficiencies if she were working on such tasks. Without necessarily pre-judging other teaching styles, the least that can be said is that adult students who want and need a task-oriented rather than teacher-orented learning environment should have it, and that those who choose this option should not be penalized by the

teacher's need or preference for frequent teacher-student contact (Harris-Bowlsbey, 1982). In this regard Englemann's (1980) warning about the "face validity trap," into which we fall when we fail to distinguish what we *intend* from what our students *perceive,* is relevant. Simply calling something "contact" makes it neither necessarily so, nor desirable. (An irreverent analogy might be between this sort of contact and that found in a subway at rush-hour.)

Knowles (1981)advises that the role of the instructor in an autonomy-fostering learning environment is "refine[d] ... away from that of transmitter and controller of instruction to that of facilitator and resource person to self-directed learners" (p.8). Students like T.M. may not be capable of that relationship at first, but according to Knowles' outlook they are capable, with guidance, of *increasing* their capacity for autonomous behavior. If increased student self-direction is not an instructional goal, however, students like T.M. are not helped to higher levels of independent adult functioning, their self-esteem suffers, and, it goes without saying, they do not learn much of anything. In fact, their experience may become an example of what Knowles termed "... teaching [that] interfers with learning" (*ibid.*, p. 9).

Truly Special Needs

Some individual differences are obvious, and the learning needs that follow from them are plain. G.N., at 30,

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has been a paraplegic for 9 years. He describes a normal class day:

> Q: What's the hardest part about being a student as an adult?
>
> G.N.: ... the thing I don't care about with my classes is we don't have a lunch break.
>
> Q: What's your schedule like? What's your day like?
>
> G.N.: My schedule starts at 11:30 in the morning and goes straight through to 3:30. We do have one break in the afternoon.
>
> Q: ... How much of a break do they give you?
>
> G.N.: Fifteen minutes.
>
> Q: If you had your choice, how would you like your day to be?
>
> G.N.: Oh, I would say maybe start around 10:00, and stop around 2:00 or 2:30.
>
> Q: And what kind of a break?
>
> G.N.: I'd say about a half an hour break. See, that gives me time to get upstairs in the elevators. And, uh, there's an awful lot of students in the school, and the elevators.... By the time you get to an elevator, I mean, your class is about to begin again.

It is not unreasonable to expect that there would be time in a four hour study schedule for a short coffee break. But this is not possible for G.N., and he is not temperamentally inclined to insist. (Later in the interview he assures me that "It isn't that bad ... I give somebody money to get something for me.") This schedule seems more appropriate to an industrial model, where employees are regimented to assure maximum productivity. It is, at best, thoughtless in an educational environment.

Two other middle-aged students, I.M. and T.D., have similar problems with a demand the ABE program makes on them: both have families and are unable to spend regular time at home on homework. I.M. has tried the ABE program twice previously and has had to quit each time. This time she says she is determined to finish, but she is adamant that she will not be able to do homework: "I have to get it done here. I can't take it home." To do this she requires a class schedule with spare time built into it. She is lucky this term: she got spares and is using them. But this is accidental and may not occur next term. She doesn't know what she'll do if it doesn't happen again.

T.D. simply has too much to do at home, with 3 children under ten years of age. Her account of what studying at home is like is both humorous and arresting:

> Q: What's the hardest part about being a student as an adult?
>
> T.D.: Homework! Say they give you a sheet. And, okay, when you get home the first thing you got to do is get supper. Then you've got to go make your beds, because I don't do it in the morning. And then ... you get the kids down to their homework and you get down to yours, and in the middle: "Mom, PJ's got this or that!" Then you got to get up and you got to solve that and then you got to go back again. And then if someone downstairs is blowing horns, or doing their music lessons or something.... And then [her ten-year-old daughter] will be yelling, "PJ, put that knife down!" So then you got to get up again.... So it's hard when you're trying to do homework.

T.D.'s husband does not fully approve of her return to school, so he is not much help with these crises. She is

convinced that she can continue upgrading and keep her marriage and family together. With some luck, and good organization, she will. However, it would be easier for her if her studies recognized the other priorities in her life. She describes what happens when a sick child or some other domestic emergency causes her to miss classes for a day:

> T.D.: I missed out on my Science sheet because I missed a day. And so she gave it out. I got it yesterday. Now, she wanted it all completed for today. And it's about *that* thick! Plus then you got Physics to do and then you got your [other work], and that metric stuff.... What can you do?

Conclusions and Implications

Some adult educators seem to regard student failure as a routine consequence of some students' poor motivation, bad planning, or inadequate material or personal resources (Fahy, in press). Adult educators with this outlook see little reason to question their practices, or their assumptions about students' needs. This belief doesn't deny that adults have unique individual characteristics, or that these might require special learning conditions, but it regards these facts as unfortunate. This view is partially justified by the argument that ABE/GED programming represents the mainstream culture, including employers, who will someday expect adaptation to their requirements by these same students. The further fact that many students *are* content and successful in this kind of programming leads to the feeling that the failures can be regarded as a dispensible minority.

Two recent developments have changed (or should have changed) this thinking. First, reports are beginning to appear showing that school-related problems, not personal inadequacies, most commonly explain withdrawals by adults from academic programs. One survey of withdrawals and non-graduates of community college programs concludes:

> It is significant to note that a very substantial percentage of the respondents cited *school, teachers and teaching methods, and courses* as the most common reasons for withdrawal and/or not graduating. Obviously, *school-related matters were the major culprits.* (Koodoo, *et. al.*, 1984; emphasis provided.)

Even the graduates, students who are successful, agree there are problems with present practices. Murphy (1983) reports that students he contacted after graduation from a vocational training program cited the need for more experience with independence, especially by provision of individualized learning opportunities. After graduation they were aware of the difference between how they had been treated as students and the expectations of competitive business or technical environments. Murphy concludes: "This finding has important implications for staff training, instructional practices, and curriculum guidelines" (*ibid.*, p. 19).

The second development is more specific to ABE/GED levels of academic programs, and arises from the discoveries and convictions of those who work in "developmental studies" programs, with students who, for a variety of personal and

academic reasons, are considered "high risks" in college programs (Snow, 1977). Roueche and Ames (1980) assert that at the beginning of this decade developmental studies formed the fastest growing area of programing in U.S. colleges. They summarize the developmental studies credo as follows:

> High risk students need to demonstrate success in a limited number of courses before taking on greater course loads. So many times, these students are giving formal education a last brave try. Time and space to heal from past failures and to grow strong enough to take on regular coursework are critical. ...the least threatening, most successful road to accomplishment is ... to say implicitly that we are all in this together, that each member of the group will be given adequate time and help to change and learn.... (p. 24).

The value of this view is supported by t autobiographies of the students I interviewed. The developmental studies assumption is that the field of adult education should now be mature enough, and should possess enough knowledge of students and of alternate learning possibilities (including but certainly not limited to CBL), to deal with students as *individuals*. This outlook arises from the undeniable fact that adult education has a large and growing number students whose "unconventional" learning needs make individual treatment essential. This attitude engenders many important curriculum innovations, including computer-based learning and use of other electronic media, learning contracts, peer tutoring, learning style assessments, off-site, odd-hour program availability, and others. These practices promote and facilitate the kind of

individual treatment of students which would have been so helpful to the students in this study.

"Individualization" may indeed mean something different to almost everyone who uses the term (Dick and Carey, 1978), but if the goal of *student choice for individual needs* is maintained, the problem of definition does not have to be a major one:

> We usually think that the term individualized program is simply a single student working alone. But ... you can have an individualized learning program with ten or fifteen students in a group all doing pretty much the same thing and in a collaborative way, as long as each student has the right of decision. The focus needs to be on the student's *decision to want to learn, what to learn, and how to learn it.* (Hodgkinson, 1975:85; emphasis Hodgkinson's.)

The students I interviewed in this study would, without exception, have benefitted greatly, both personally and academically, from some choices in when, where and how they might learn. Without choices, they had problems. In medical terms these students suffered from iatrogenic ("doctor-induced") conditions -- our well-intentioned treatments actually caused part of their learning pathology.

Learning choices permit adult students to remove themselves from frustrating or boring situations, to adjust when other responsibilities demand priority, and to exercise the same self-direction in learning that they enjoy and are expected to use in other areas of their lives. The connection with, and the best justification for, CBL (and for all other media) in adult learning is in its capacity to

facilitate *choices* (Brudner, 1982). If teachers and administrators of adult education programs listen to their students, they will hear eloquent requests for this crucial but often neglected curriculum feature.

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